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Gates Foundation Announces First Grants in New Program on College Completion

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced today \$69-million in grants to kick off its effort to double the number of low-income young people who complete a college degree or certificate program by age 26.

The 22 grants will primarily go to universities, research centers, scholarship providers, and charities that work with youths—but most of the funds will eventually flow through to higher-education institutions, especially community colleges.

"We feel that community colleges are underresourced institutions where the R&D dollars that philanthropy can bring to the table can deliver a big impact for the students that we care about," Hilary Pennington, director of the foundation's postsecondary program, said in an interview.

But she added that the foundation's long-term aspiration is to help all students move more quickly toward whatever degree they choose to pursue, and she suggested that four-year institutions would be a bigger part of the foundation's focus in future years.

The Gates foundation announced its plan to double college-completion rates by 2025 last month at a conference in Seattle, where the foundation is based ([The Chronicle](#), November 12).

The new grants will support projects in three broad areas: making the case to policy makers, educators, and business leaders about the need for increasing college-completion rates; accelerating success in remedial education; and ensuring that young people have the financial, social, and academic support to succeed in college.

Support for Remedial Education

The biggest grant—\$16.5-million over four years—went to MDC, a nonprofit organization based in Chapel Hill, N.C., that manages Achieving the Dream, a national effort at more than 80 community colleges to find strategies that help students complete remedial education, move on to college-level courses, and receive a degree or certificate.

The organization will select 15 colleges in the network that have uncovered strategies that are already working, and will use the grant money to expand and evaluate those programs.

For example, at Mountain Empire Community College, in Big Stone Gap, Va., a faster-paced remedial mathematics class resulted in a 60-percent pass rate, compared with a 27-percent pass rate in standard classes, according to MDC.

"What Gates wants to do is take the programs that have worked, and give them enough money to really take the programs to scale within these schools," said Richard Hart, an MDC spokesman.

More Scholarships

Another recipient, MDRC, a nonprofit research organization based in New York, will receive \$13-million over four years to expand a program that provides scholarships to low-income students, and ties the scholarships to attendance and performance. The Gates money and support from other foundations and states will allow 4,500 students to receive scholarships at institutions in four states. The scholarships will go to students at the Borough of Manhattan and Hostos Community Colleges, in the City University of New York system; Lorain County, Owens, and Sinclair Community Colleges, in Ohio; the University of New Mexico; and colleges statewide in California.

Ms. Pennington said that a pilot program conducted by MDRC in Louisiana prior to Hurricane Katrina had "shown remarkable impact." The program gives students cash and other benefits for enrolling in college full-time and maintaining a minimum grade-point average.

Sustaining Research

The foundation will give \$5.4-million over three years to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, whose "Measuring Up" reports assign grades in areas like college affordability and completion rates to all 50 states ([The Chronicle](#), December 3). The Lumina Foundation for Education is also making a grant to support the center, said Joni E. Finney, the center's vice president. The center no longer receives support from three other foundations that helped create it 10 years ago.

"Without the Gates and Lumina grants, the national center would have closed," Ms. Finney said.

The University of California at Los Angeles will receive \$7.6-million over six years for a study of 16- to 26-year-olds in high-poverty communities and the obstacles they encounter on the way to a degree or certificate.

The study will look at what types of interventions—like job-training programs, after-school programs, and alternative high schools—are best at helping students get on track to college or well-paying jobs.

The Gates Foundation "is interested in understanding where it can invest its money later on, once we know where the leverage points are," said Amanda L. Datnow, a professor of education studies at the University of California at San Diego and a co-director of the study.

Others receiving grants larger than \$1-million include:

- Forum for Youth Investment (\$1.2-million over three years to disseminate research about the importance of postsecondary credentials for low-income and disconnected youth).
- Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce (\$2.9-million over four years to expand its research).
- Harvard University (\$1.9-million over four years for a research project focused on college enrollment and completion).
- Jobs for the Future (\$3.3-million over three years to "accelerate the scaling up of postsecondary on-ramps and supports").
- National Youth Employment Coalition (\$5.6-million over four years to expand organizations that help low-income youths earn a degree or credential).
- YouthBuild USA (\$6-million over three years to engage 1,500 low-income youth who have previously dropped out of school).

The full list of grantees is available on the foundation's [Web site](#).